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AUTHOR	Lindblade, Tom
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ABSTRACT

Experiential educators can prepare students and clients for living in the global society of the new millennium through international experiences, both short- and long-term. The elements of experiential education--risk/challenge, direct experience, processing and reflection--can be important aspects of the international experience. Historically, the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has focused narrowly on outdoor adventure in North America and has not treated international education as part of experiential education. A broader definition of adventure that includes any experience with an uncertain outcome would encompass international experiences. These adventures would be significantly enhanced by using the tools of experiential education. Many experiential programs have the means to create significant international opportunities. Ten suggestions for approaching a first international program offering include: think small; fill out a risk management form; see the first experience as a shakedown; seek out allies and co-leaders; limit objectives; choose a limited itinerary; include opportunities for service; begin planning a budget as soon as possible; have at least a rough marketing plan; and plan the experiential methodologies to be included. The Field and Experiential Learning Program at College of DuPage is briefly described as an example of a program that combines college courses with an experiential international trip. (SV)

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Individuals and commerce can move around the globe with greater and greater ease. Electronic communication puts practically every place in the world just seconds away. A true global society has begun to form. Americans seem ambivalent about these changes. On the one hand, 88% of people recently surveyed in the U.S. said that the ability to live among people with different backgrounds is essential or very important; on the other hand, they rated the study of languages as the lowest priority of all school subjects. It seems that there is a growing consensus as to the need for learning to live in this shrinking world, but little agreement on how best to teach the requisite skills. It is clear that if we are to help people to learn to live with people of other cultures and backgrounds, we must approach the problem from a number of different directions.

One significant way in which experiential educators can prepare our students/clients for living in the new millennium is through international experiences, both short and long term. The principles of experiential education can be applied in the context of visiting and immersion in another culture. The elements of risk/challenge, direct experience, processing and reflection can all be made important elements of an international experience. It is also easy to include additional significant academic learning to provide a fully rounded field experience.

Over the past twenty five years, I have had the opportunity to plan and lead over 25 international courses, visiting over thirty countries. During that time I have been able to personally witness the power that contact with another culture has to influence the lives of all involved. One recent example involved our guide in South Africa in the summer of 1997. Ian, a master guide, and typically "stiff upper-lip" South African came to our campfire with a bit of moisture in his eyes our last night before returning to Johannesburg. He told the group that his view of Americans had been forever changed. Ian said that prior to meeting us, his perception (and that held by his guide colleagues) had been that Americans were demanding, distant and rich. From our students (ranging in age from 18–73) he had experienced that Americans could be accepting, human, and generous.

This past summer in Zimbabwe, on a Sunday morning, several students asked if it would be possible to attend a church service after our morning hike. The guides were able to arrange a visit to a small Catholic church at a mining company-town at the end of the hike. The church was a small, exceedingly simple concrete building with not much more than basic wooden pews and an alter. Everyone was welcomed for the choir practice and the service itself. The choir had nothing but a tambourine and a drum, but the music they made was absolutely amazing. The warmth and welcome from the adults and children was a true transcultural experience. I think that from that moment on, our students (most of whom are actually adults in their forties and fifties) will never look at people with little in the way of material things the same way again. It is hard to know what the effect of these contacts will be, but multiplied by thousands, they are probably capable of creating many new kinds of international relationships.

Historically, the focus of AEE has been on outdoor adventure within the borders of North America. Traditionally AEE has not treated international education as a part of Experiential Education. About the only international program presently visible in AEE is Play for Peace, which is an excellent program with great potential, but one wonders why there has not been more movement in international directions. It seems to me that AEE can bring a unique and necessary viewpoint to international education because of our focus on expeditionary learning, creative risk taking, risk management, processing and reflection.

Perhaps AEE's lack of international programs is the result of focusing too narrowly on outdoor adventure activities. It may be that what is needed is simply a change in focus. I believe that we must broaden our definition of adventure to include the idea that any experience with an uncertain outcome (such as an international experience) is an adventure. These adventures are significantly enhanced by using the tools of experiential education. In addition, by working with other academic and outdoor disciplines we can create allies and supporters who bring their own unique perspectives to our practice. These relationships are extremely helpful to have around when political and budgetary decisions are being made.

The means for creating significant international opportunities exist in many experiential programs. Here are some thoughts about how to approach a first international offering:

1. Think small. Field and Experiential Learning at College of DuPage currently offers about eighteen international courses each year, but we started with only one such course in the summer of 1978. Then, as now, starting may be as simple as deciding that this is what you want to do, and then thinking about what unique capabilities and challenges for offering such an experience there might be in your organization.

2. Fill out a Risk Management Form. A good risk management form will help you think through and plan for the risks that will be encountered.

3. See your first experience as a shakedown. It is important to realize that you will make mistakes (we continue to make mistakes 25 years later). It is important to learn as much as possible from this first experience. If you do, you will make fewer mistakes in the future.

4. Seek out allies and co-leaders. An interdisciplinary approach is best. One of the major limitations to this is the cost of transporting instructors on field trips. However, the benefits are enormous as mentioned previously. I have occasionally seen a tendency in some

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programs to limit leadership to only the core of the experiential program. This is a serious tactical error. At College of DuPage we now have more than forty full time faculty from a wide variety of teaching disciplines who have taught or participated in international programs. This has provided us a huge base of support, and allows us to expand our offerings far beyond anything originally contemplated.

5. Limit your objectives. Pick a destination that does not pose major logistical problems such as significant language and cultural barriers. Start with only one limited program. Our first international program was a summer course called "Hut Hopping in Austria," named after the Sierra Club Book of the same name. Airfares to Europe were very inexpensive, and most Austrians speak English. The hut system is the most accessible in the world; it allows participants to bring a minimum of equipment, and all food can be purchased on site.

6. Choose a limited itinerary. One of our most frequent mistakes over the years has been attempting to accomplish too much. I inadvertently made this same mistake last summer in Africa. It is important to limit activities to your groups abilities, with plenty of time for individual activities and reflection. If at all possible get help on the ground. Outfitters/guides can make a tremendous difference, but will cost more. The AEE listserve has recently become a wonderful source for suggestions.

7. Whenever possible include opportunities for service. Recently, our groups have cleaned up an island in Belize and contributed to schools in Zimbabwe. This should be an important and significant part of any experiential program. It is not always possible to plan these opportunities ahead, so flexibility in taking advantage of opportunities as they present themselves is necessary.

8. Accumulate information for a budget as soon as possible. Our financial planning form is included in our materials. Time lines for things like publicity may dictate how firm a budget you can devise. Exact airfares are usually not available more than a year ahead. Frequently you will need to use your best guess. We have had to raise the price when fares change. This is uncomfortable for all involved but has never resulted in a program being canceled. It is important to use the terms "estimated cost" or "approximate cost" in marketing materials so that you are not locked in. Programs that do not charge participants directly may have to resort to other forms of financing. Many groups use participants to raise money, grants may be available, work study opportunities may exist, exchange programs may present opportunities for savings. Creativity will be necessary!

9. Have at least a rough marketing plan. Our time lines for marketing frequently start more than a year ahead, because of the necessity of having promotional materials designed and printed, and in order to get advance notice placed in our Quarterly class schedule. Your time lines may not be as long. Marketing for one program may be as simple as putting together a flyer or a poster, or as it frequently does for us, it may involve mailings, public service announcements, designed posters, etc. The best single marketing tool is word of mouth from leaders committed to making the program happen. We have had instructors fill an international course simply by asking students in their other courses.

10. Plan experiential methodologies to be included. It is important to plan how you will structure your course, whether you call it that or not. Participants need to know up-front what to expect so that they can buy into the process. Planning should include time set aside for reflection and how will that be accomplished, when and how will academic material be presented. How will you meet indigenous people (e.g., home visits, cultural presentations, service projects, etc.). Structures can be tremendously varied.

Finally, just a short description of what a mature experiential interdisciplinary program can look like: The Field and Experiential Learning Program at College of DuPage currently offers about eighteen international/interdisciplinary short courses each year. Students have visited over fifty countries and all seven continents. Instructors from over 30 different academic disciplines have taught in the program and widely varied program models have been utilized. Part time and full time faculty members are encouraged to submit course/program proposals, and a support system has been developed that assists in program development, marketing, and finances. While cultural immersion cannot be as great in these short courses as in the more traditional semester-length residential study abroad programs, this model works better for the widest variety of our students because it is less expensive and requires considerably less time away from school and jobs.

More specifically, the model used this summer for our program in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia combined on campus courses in Transcultural Studies and The Ecology of Southern Africa with an 18 day field trip. Students are required to enroll in course work, keep journals, do research and a class presentation, and write a short paper prior to leaving. People-to-people contact was encouraged.

The important point I wish to make is that the problems in putting together international programs may seem daunting at first, but when taken a step at a time, they can be quite manageable.

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